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A PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDY OF CITY OF ROCKS

by

Craig Law

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

Art

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah
1978

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for my wife, Nancy, who supported me through all this. My committee, R.T., A.J., and Larry are not just teachers but friends whose encouragement and help have made my stay at USU very worthwhile.

Craig Law
Craig Law

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ABSTRACT

A Photographic Study of City of Rocks

by

Craig Law, Master of Fine Arts

Utah State University, 1977

Major Professor: Ralph T. Clark

Department: Art (Photography)

This creative report deals with the project of photographing a remote area in Southern Idaho, near Almo, called City of Rocks. The photographer worked in the tradition of "Straight Photography." The goal was not to document the area but to make images about what one might feel from the subjects rather than images about the subject. The hope was that the resulting photographs would have a "life sense of their own."

(34 pages)

REVIEW OF RESOURCES

In the USU Library Gallery there is a portfolio of photographic prints of Yosemite National Park by Ansel Adams. During my early experiences at Logan, I often viewed this portfolio intently. As the years have passed, I realize this was my first encounter with photographs that were more than reality, yet true to the inherent qualities of photography. They possess a life of their own, though they are inanimate objects. Rather than making me feel, as most nature photographs do, that "I would like to see this place someday," I was satisfied with the photograph itself and realized it gave me much more than reality.

As time has progressed and I have viewed many more photographers' works, as well as listened to or read their philosophy, it becomes apparent that there has been a fine tradition established for photography which is not the mere record of a place or person nor serves other utilitarian purposes, but is the photographer's personal expression of his feelings about the world, himself, and his relationship to this world. Explaining this tradition further, Francis Bruguiere has said:

A photograph can be something in itself--it can exist independently as a photograph apart from the subject; it can take on a life of its own, aside from its documentary value.

. . . it finally becomes a thing beyond the thing portrayed . . . some sort of section of the soul of the artist that gets detached and comes out to one from the picture. (2:32-34)

On two occasions during 1974, Paul Caponigro visited Logan. He brought with him many of his photographs, which as he explained them taught me a great deal about what serious photography could be. Because of his musical background, much of his verbal clarifications were musical in nature. Having a similar background, I understood readily what he was expressing. He spoke of a camera and light-sensitive materials as if they were various musical instruments; the sounds from these instruments being comparable to the values in a photograph. He further explained that just as a musician must practice scales for months and years to develop the coordination and conditioning necessary to play a great concerto, so the photographer, who expects to make fine prints, must practice his value scales using camera and sensitized materials for years to gain the control and understanding to make great photographs. For both the accomplished musician and the creative photographer, there are no short cuts.

At the close of Caponigro's visit, I acquired one of his prints. It is from his second portfolio and is a Connecticut woods scene. The print has influenced this project, and

over the years has given me great visual pleasure. It is more meaningful for me now than when it first came into my household.

Mr. Caponigro's work is founded in the tradition on which my project City of Rocks is based, and much of the early attitude with which I approached the project came from him. This tradition initially finds its beginning in the life and work of Alfred Stieglitz. He played a great role in the advancement of the media of photography as well as the development of modern art in America. The attitude of using the inherent quality of photography, its clarity and precision, so that the image was indeed a photograph and not an imitation of a painting, coupled with the development of the "equivalent" concept, are for me Stieglitz's significant contributions. He wrote movingly about his experiences in making the cloud series:

One of America's young literary lights believed the secret power of my photography was due to the power of hypnotism I had over my sitters, etc. . . . I was amazed. . . . What . . . had (been) said annoyed me . . . I was in the midst of my summer's photographing, . . . to add to my knowledge . . . going more deeply into life--into photography.

I always watched clouds. Studied them . . . I wanted to photograph clouds to find out what I had learned in forty years about photography. Through clouds to put down my philosophy of life--to show that my photographs were not due to subject matter--not to special trees, or faces, or interiors, to special privileges, clouds were there for everyone--no tax as yet on them--free.

So I began to work with the clouds--and it was great excitement--daily for weeks. Every time I developed I was so wrought up, always believing I had nearly gotten what I was after--but had failed. A most tantalizing sequence of days and weeks. I knew exactly what I was after . . . I wanted a series of photographs which when seen by Ernest Bloch (the great composer) he would exclaim: Music! Music! Man. Why that is music! How did you ever do that? And he would point to violins, and flutes, and oboes, and brass, full of enthusiasm, and would say he'd have to write a symphony called "Clouds!" Not like a Debussy but much, much more.

And when finally I had a series of ten photographs printed, and Bloch saw them--what I said I wanted to happen happened verbatim.

Straight photographs . . . All in the power of every photographer of all time, and I satisfied I had learnt something during the forty years . . .

Now if the cloud series are due to my powers of hypnotism I plead "Guilty" . . . My photographs look like photographs--and in the eyes (of pictorial photographers) they therefore can't be art My aim is increasingly to make my photographs look so much like photographs that unless one has eyes and sees, they won't be seen--and still everyone will never forget them having once looked at them. (5:143-144)

Shortly after this work was done, Stieglitz began calling the cloud photographs "equivalents" to help explain that their real significance for him lay not in the fact that they were pictures of clouds, but that they represented his understanding and feelings about life and the world. They were not photographs about the subject in front of the camers, but were photographs of his feelings.

Another photographer who has influenced my work in important ways is Minor White. His book Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations (6) was very moving for me. Through it he has further developed and refined the use of the Stieglitz term "equivalent." For him, camera work is done in a state of meditation, of heightened awareness. He talks of the "Silence of Seeing" (1; 170-173) and deals with his photographs on that level of consciousness. His general attitude of approaching one's work with a clarity of mind and openness of heart coupled with a sense of reverence for life is very appealing to me, and many others.

During the course of my instruction in photography, I have encountered a theory of composition that states "if you divide the picture plane into nine equal spaces, the junctioning points of this division (points ABCD) will be the best place to put the subject." (Figure 1)

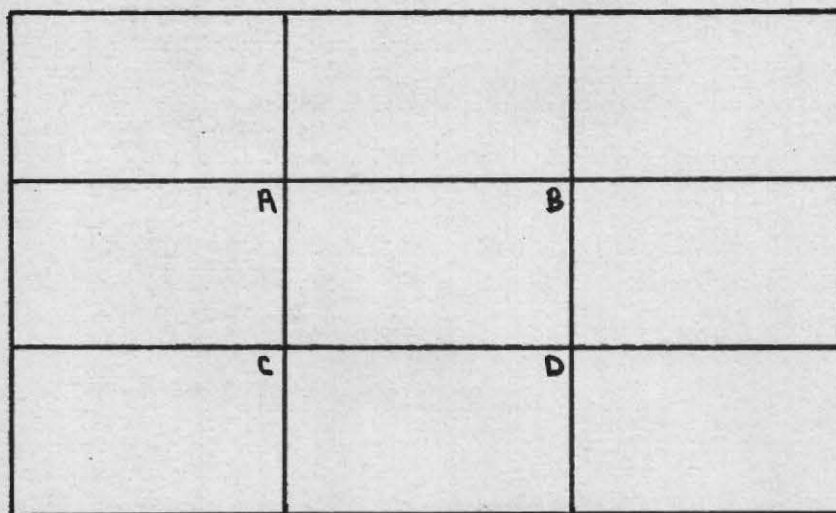


Figure 1

But in reading Edward Weston, he says,

When subject matter is forced to fit into pre-conceived patterns, there can be no freshness of vision. Following rules of composition can only lead to a tedious repetition of pictorial cliches. (3:163)

This rule of composition is only one of many that I've occasionally come across. If one were to follow them exclusively, it would be like painting "by the numbers" which I did as a child and which even then was tedious to me. Yet many seem to need these rules so they flourish. They have little to do with meaningful work. Paul Caponigro, who was also a student of Minor White, often told us that he approached his subjects very openly and lets his response to the subject suggest how it should be photographed rather than "bulling his way through." For me this is a much more sensitive way to approach a possible photograph.

This creative project is thus founded on the traditions and philosophy of "Straight Photography" (5:111-131). The objective being to photograph that which I feel about the subject rather than strictly documenting the subject.

CREATIVE PROCEDURES

Why should I photograph City of Rocks? As an impressionable boy living in Garland, Utah, my family would often go there for a day's outing. Having not been there nor thought of City of Rocks for over ten years, one night I dreamed about being there photographing. The circumstances of my life at that point were these: I was considering several other projects for my thesis, but had made no decision; we had moved back to my home town of Garland to explore the possibility of documenting that small town lifestyle; and I had recently attended a workshop with Paul Caponigro. As a result of the dream, my wife Nancy, and I took a day's outing to City of Rocks. I was very emotionally moved by seeing this place again. It seemed to have so much life of its own that the number of possible images from which I felt an emotional response seemed endless. And now, after working there for over a year, the possibilities still seem endless.

Another reason I was drawn to work at City of Rocks was that no one had ever been serious about really photographing this area and I felt I would be doing a service in documenting it. However, this attitude became a major problem to overcome in the first series of photographs. I

was the only one who could understand the intention of the images. For example, in Figure 2 I saw a strange guardian, a powerful sentinel, dominating the area from atop a granite ridge.

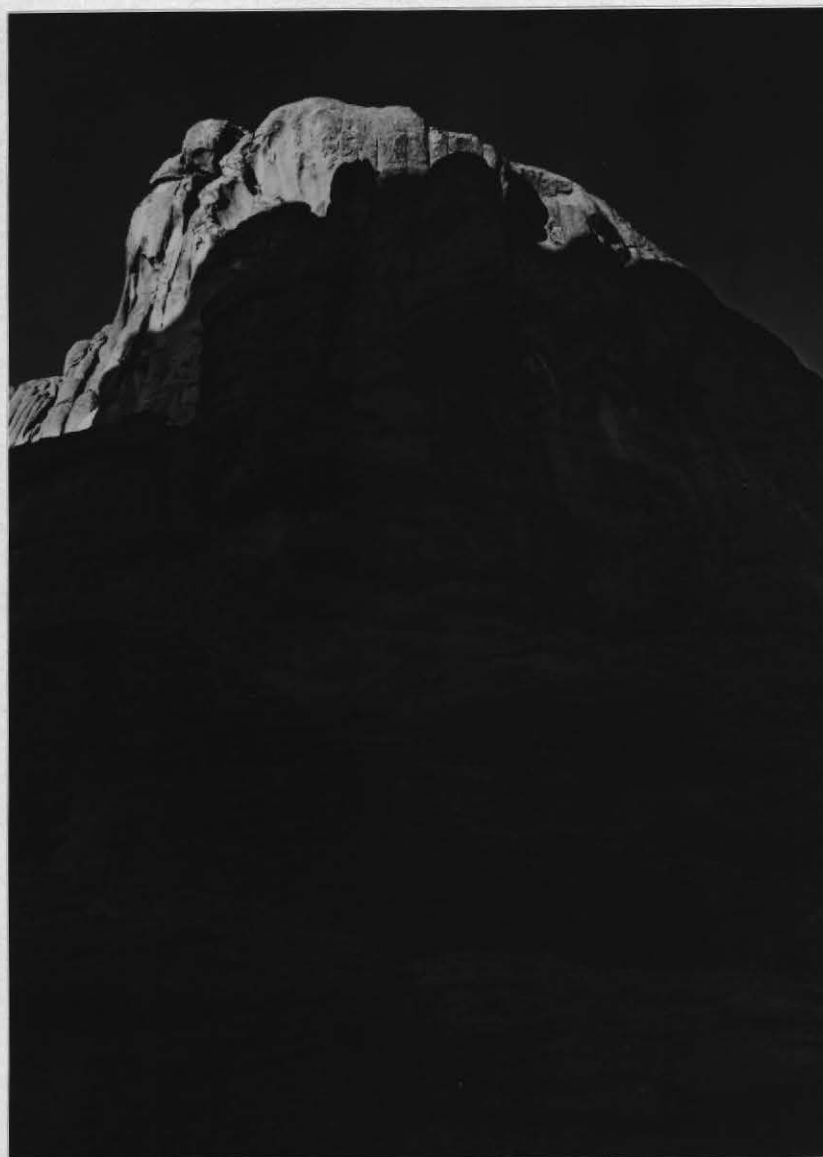


Figure 2

It had a sense of horrible majesty. I made this photograph of that experience; yet, when I showed it to others they clearly did not respond to that figure as I had. Later I realized, though the "guardian" had been for me such a dominant part of the actual scene, I had failed to make it a dominant part of my photograph, making instead a "document" of the ridge. It was such a small part of the total picture plane that one had to hunt to find it. My effort was divided and since I was not clear in my own mind what would be dominant, the image failed.

After several months of work at City of Rocks, Mary Peck, Rich Wilder and I exhibited the work we had done there. For the other photographers the exhibit was a conclusion; for me a midpoint. In this exhibit it was evident that though City of Rocks was one place, it was seen quite differently through the eyes of these three people. This greatly strengthened my conviction that some of my own work was not merely imitative of established photographers, like White and Caponigro, but had worth of its own, especially since we all had been exposed to these men's work.

In preparing this exhibit, Figures 3 and 4 were set next to each other, and I saw a new relationship never realized before. The positive and negative theme of similar subjects was to repeat itself often, not as a preconceived notion, but as a natural pattern that had become part of the



Figure 3



Figure 4

work. In the positive image, the subject is light with a dark background, and in the negative image, the subject is dark with a light background. I also began to see negative as well as positive image possibilities before the exposure of the film. (Figure 5) Since one step in the photographic process is a negative image, it seems natural that this step could become an end rather than a means to the end.

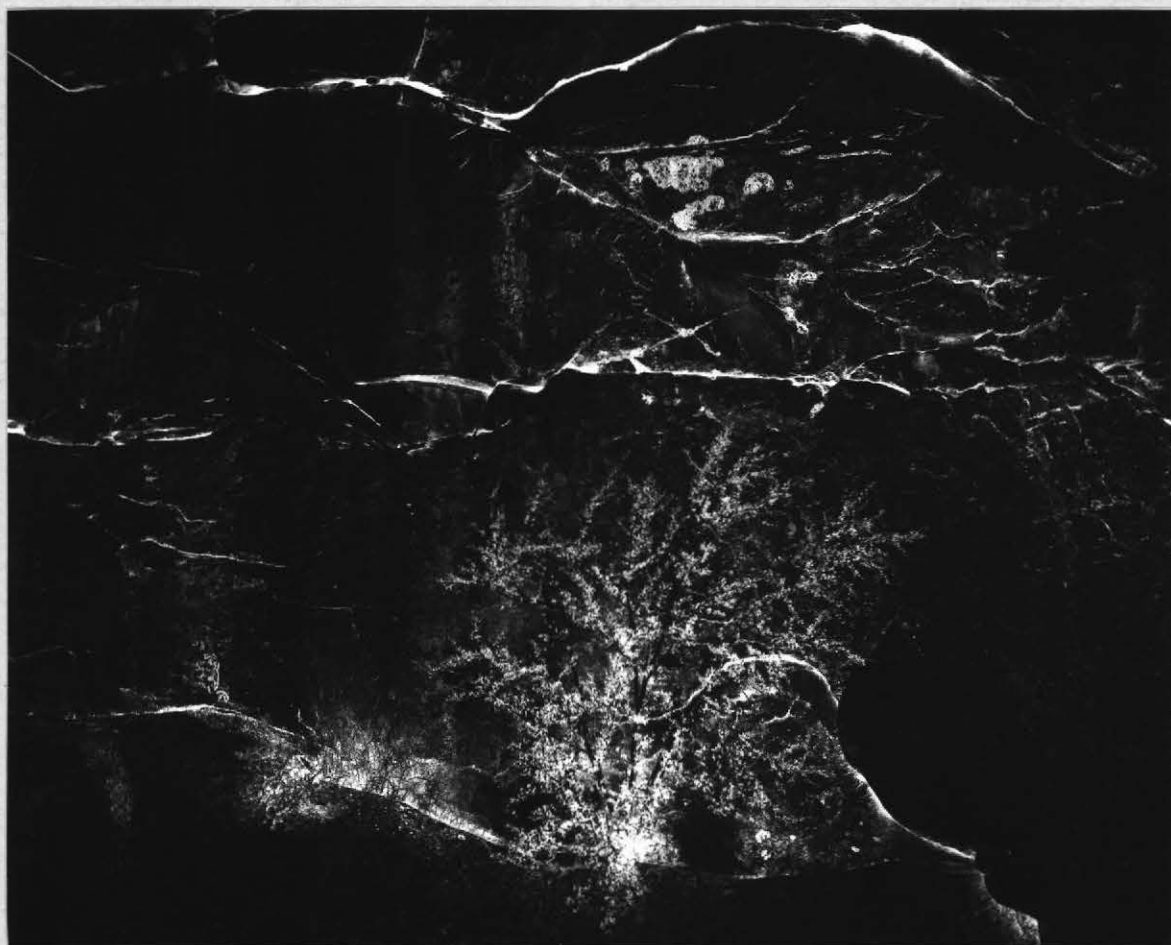


Figure 5

Some "Being Forms" or rocks that in my imagination became live animate beings, also began to assert themselves. (Figure 6)



Figure 6

My aim in photographing was to retain as much of the life sense as I had felt. Often in the print it would become more than reality. (Figure 7)



Figure 7

In putting borders on reality as well as darkening the sky with filters and increasing the contrast what one is seeing is more than what one would see if the actual scene were compared to the print.

After a time I seemed to be exclusively photographing to produce faces and beings. The images became weak, repetitive and lifeless, so I stopped specifically looking for that and let myself once again be more open to all things there.

I photographed through the winter of 1974, but this proved to be more a test of endurance rather than a distinct period of meaningful work. The initial importance I placed on photographing City of Rocks in all seasons of the year became less important than the feelings I wanted to express in my images. The environment had great influence on the images I made, but whether there was snow or not was secondary to the expressive qualities of the photograph. One realization that came through strongly was that even though the environment seemed placid, it was responsible for making these incredible amorphic forms which were so intriguing.

(Figure 8)



Figure 8

Figure 9 came in response to the sensation that the space around this rock was eating into it like acid. Making the sky a paper-base white seems to convey this feeling.

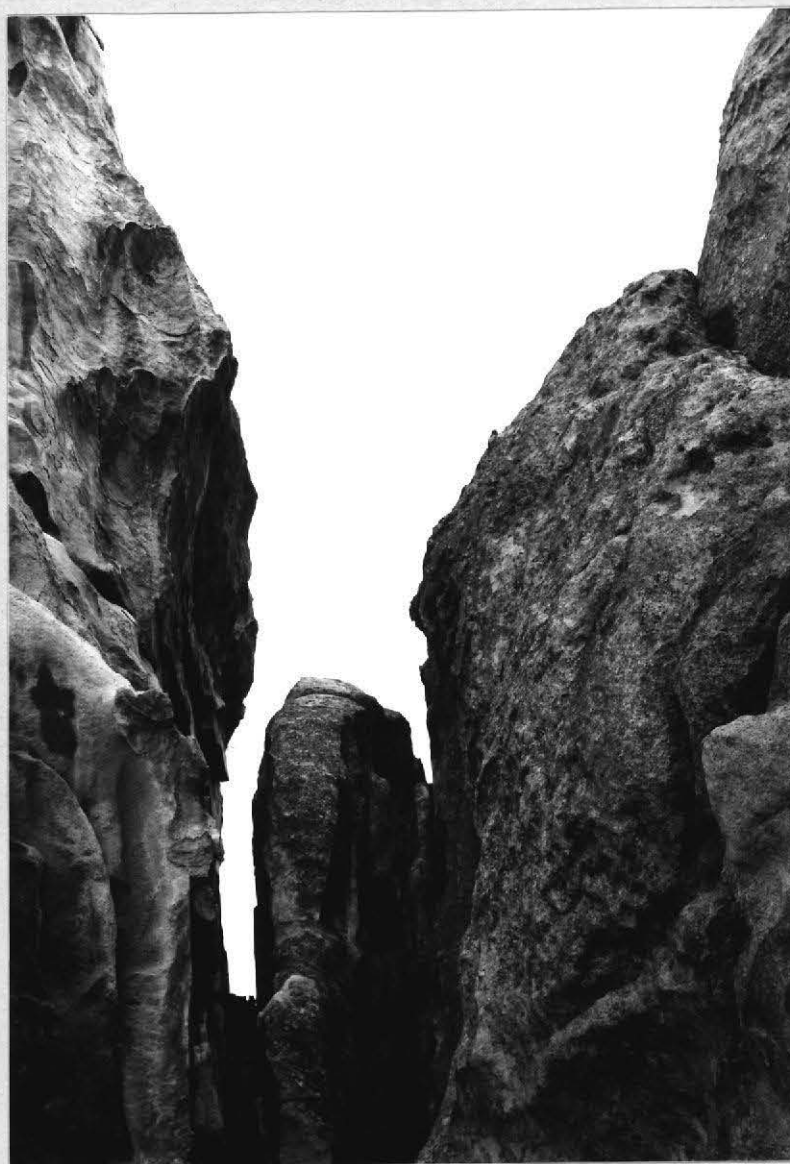


Figure 9

One of the most productive periods of time at City of Rocks came during the late spring and early summer of 1975. (Figure 10)



Figure 10

The images I was feeling and previsualizing were coming through as I wanted them to in the final print. (Figure 11) My coordination of tools, mind, emotions and materials all seemed to come together. I wanted to be able to stay at

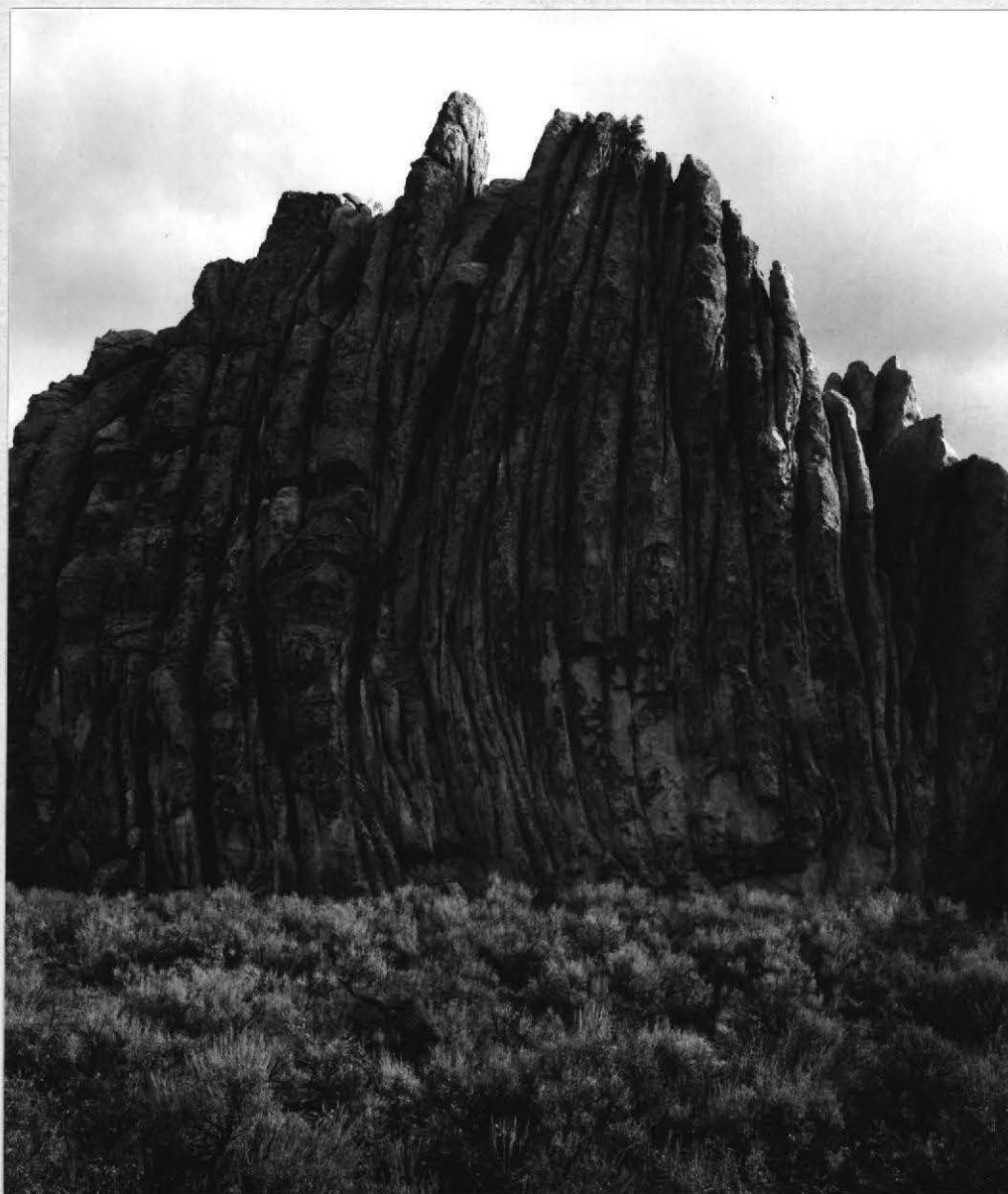


Figure 11

City of Rocks for several days at a time so I purchased a changing bag so that I would have a portable dark room in the field with me to change exposed film for unexposed film. I spent two incredible days working with the 4x5 camera seeing and feeling things I'd not experienced before. On returning to Garland, I began developing the film and much to my horror discovered almost all the film had been fogged by incorrectly using the changing bag. Light had leaked into the bag because I hadn't positioned my arms right. I was sick but determined to make some of those images I had seen in the last two days. I loaded film again in my time-proven, light-secured darkroom at home and left immediately for City of Rocks, arriving about 1:00 a.m. At sunrise I awoke, excited to begin again. As I went to get the camera ready for the day's work, I realized that in all my haste and frustration at Garland, I had left the tripod at home. It would take four hours to drive to Garland and back again. On a previous foggy day when I had run out of 4x5 film, I had used my 35mm camera for the remainder of the day and had been very pleased with the resulting images. (Figures 12 and 13) However, I had refrained from using the small camera because I felt I needed to be consistent with my tools. But on this morning, I had no choice if I wanted to photograph at all. I used the 35mm and again had an incredible experience. Rather than hinder me, the 35mm camera, which



Figure 12



Figure 13

I was actually more familiar with than the 4x5, seemed to open yet more possibilities. Because of the rapidity with which I could prepare the camera for exposure, I could make a photograph in only a few moments once I had decided upon my response. Cloud and rock sequences (Figure 14) that most often were too fleeting for me to photograph with the 4x5 camera were very accessible with the 35mm camera. Some of the relationships were incredibly organized, with clouds



Figure 14

mimicking the rock shapes. (Figure 15)



Figure 15

After having this very rewarding experience, I decided that this disaster with my 4x5 film and the changing bag was meant to happen so I would loosen up and use all the tools I had available. The important thing wasn't the camera, lens, film or technique, but the lasting life form I put into the two-dimensional photograph.

As to the technical side of this project, most of the work was done with an old Graphic 4x5 view camera with two Kodak Ektar lenses, 127mm and 207mm focal length. I had previously worked through Adam's Zone System with the help

of Minor White (7) and Arnold Gassen (2:45-81). The majority of the 4x5 inch negatives were made on Kodak Tri X film developed in D-76. This film and developer combination served me very well. I chose it because of its great versatility in both increasing and decreasing the contrast range of the original subject matter. I visualized no prints larger than 11 x 14 inches so the grain of the film was acceptable. Actually, my lenses were just not capable of producing a fine print of much larger size regardless of the film used.

My 35mm camera is a Nikon F2 with Nikon lenses of 24mm, 35mm, 55mm macro, and 105mm focal lengths. The films used were Kodak Tri X and Plus X both developed in 9% sodium sulfite solution with Edwal FG7 (1:15).

Seagull Oriental paper, a Japanese import, was the dominant photographic printing paper used for this project. In the glossy surface, it is capable of such a wide tonal range with excellent blacks and whites, that there was no need for other papers. All prints were selenium toned for increased depth and permanence.

After the spring and summer work, I felt the City of Rocks was near a conclusion for this thesis project. However, a new product came on the market. It was a direct positive color process called Cibachrome. Because of the more permanent dyes and longer life expectancy of this color photographic paper, it was appealing to me. I had a little time before the exhibit date to work with this color process.

I used Kodak Kodachrome films and printed directly from the slide to the print. Some of the images produced this way were meaningful (Figures 16 and 17), but for the most part I realized that my knowledge and understanding of color was limited and the work was immature in relation to all that I had done up to this point.



Figure 16

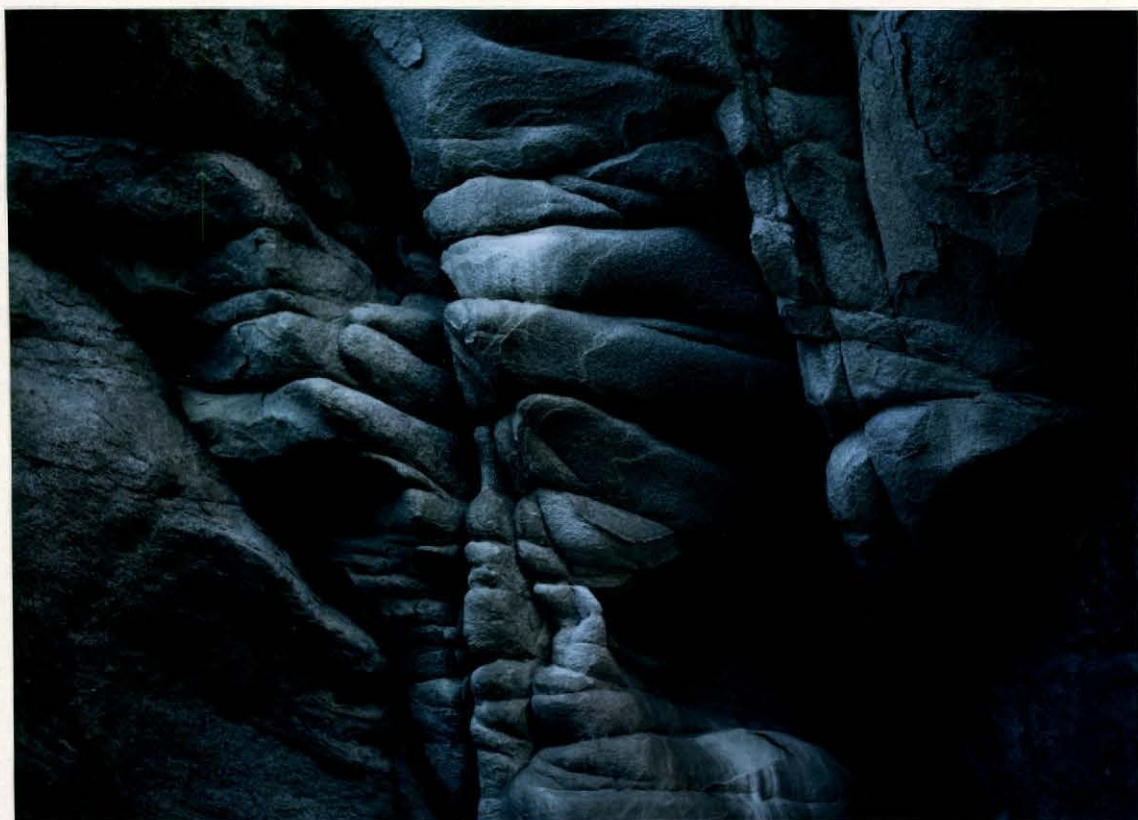


Figure 17

The final phase of the project was the exhibit itself. All too often this is not considered part of the expressive statement. For me this was an intricate part of the statement. The area I could work with was the large room of the USU Library Gallery. It has many entrances. I wanted to simplify these to one directed flow so the prints would be viewed in an ordered sequence that added to the meaning of the individual prints. I painted some available door panels a flat black and hung them with cables over the entrances and exits I didn't want used. This then made a long rectangular room with an adjoining hallway. The long rectangular shape was uninteresting to me so I hung more black door panels at varying depths in the room in a way that would help move the viewer easily through the space. I was pleased with the resulting area. One of the hardest parts of preparing the exhibit, but also most crucial, was editing the 160 prints down to the 67 that were exhibited and that I felt could relate to one another and the Gallery space. (A slide set of the exhibit is available at the USU Slide Library.) The coupling of positive type print with negative type reoccurred several times. Also included were six Cibachrome prints which, even though conventional color, had positive and negative relationships that coordinated well with the black and white prints. My primary objective with this exhibit was to have a clean unified space where the prints could be seen clearly and comfortably as a richly varied experience

of City of Rocks. The space should serve the photographs.

I wanted the viewer to compare one print with another for the intended relationships I wanted seen.

The exhibit was introduced with this statement:

A teacher made the comment that the rare experience of making an image that contains a sense of life within itself was what made all his work as an artist worthwhile. In photographing City of Rocks my striving has been toward that type of image.

Having the experience of going through an academic program has taught me much, some of the most important things being that simple hard work seems to be the best remedy for my ills, that rules are good but if art is done simply according to the rules it dies, and finally, that teachers are human and don't have all the answers.

To you as the viewer, I would ask that you look slowly and sensitively. City of Rocks has given me much during the last year. My hope is that your viewing of these photographs would give you some of what I have received.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Photography is a relatively new media, being invented in 1829. And yet, in its short history of about 150 years, it today influences in some way all of our lives. As a means of personal expression, an "art form," photography has been used by some since its inception. My project finds its roots in the work of people like Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston, Minor White, Ansel Adams, and Paul Caponigro, whose primary intent with their photographs is not to make objective records of what is before the camera, but what their feelings are about the subject. Their tools were traditional cameras, lenses, and conventional light-sensitive materials, making images that were true to the inherent qualities of photography and not imitative of other media.

City of Rocks, an area known to me since childhood, served very well as a place to photograph for an extended period of time, working in the tradition previously explained. Of greatest value for me were the problems I encountered in the project and the process of working through them. At first the desire to document the area was a problem which got in the way of making meaningful photographs. After that was resolved came the gradual fixation with faces and "being forms" which in time lead to lifeless repetitions. Finally,

the rigidity I felt in using only the 4x5 camera was a problem that was painfully resolved. The outcome of these problems was that I learned that my images needed to contain a sense of simplicity and clarity at the picture plane if my intent was to be realized by the viewer, that to make sensitive response to a subject my mind needed to be open and free from preconceived ideas, and that all tools are capable of making meaningful images, the only limitation being the person using them.

Through this experience I have become a believer that to be free to see photographically or to use any media of art, one needs to have mastered the technical problems of the media. The image possibilities are so much richer when one is not encumbered by mechanical problems.

City of Rocks is a beginning for me. I am not of the opinion that through this project photographs were made that will definitely be of great and lasting importance. There were ample successes and the project as a whole seems worthwhile. I understand so much better this tradition of serious photography in which I chose to work and in the future will try to enlarge that tradition by working to establish a more intimate personal style. Color work is something I'm drawn to as well as working with hand-made emulsions. However, the goal desired will still be to make photographs that exist for their own sake, that contain a "life sense."

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